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What hampers ‘political’ action in environmental alternative action organizations? Exploring the scope for strategic agency under post-political conditions

Joost de Moor ^a, Philip Catney ^b and Brian Doherty ^b

^aDepartment of Political Science, Stockholm University, Stockholm, Sweden; ^bDepartment of Social, Political and Global Studies, Keele University, Newcastle-under-Lyme, UK

ABSTRACT

The proliferation of environmental alternative action organization (EAAOs) is a defining feature of present-day environmentalism. The literature on sustainable materialism has celebrated this as an appropriate, effective, and above all, political strategy. By contrast, drawing on post-political and post-ecologist critiques, some have argued that this shift signifies the de-politicisation of environmentalism because it leaves the status quo unchallenged. In this article, we argue that these opposing views can be reconciled first by considering that ‘the political’ has at least three different dimensions, and second by taking account of how activists reflexively navigate the different challenges posed by each of these dimensions in their strategizing. Based on an ethnographic case study of two organizations in Manchester (UK), we show that while EAAOs developing environmental alternatives may indeed be motivated by radical ideas – as suggested in literature on sustainable materialism – the contradictory demands of diffusion and agonism limit their expression through contentious action. We argue that the post-political context in which these groups operate thus has some depoliticizing impact, yet that activists consciously navigate these challenges to maximize their political impact.

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Introduction

Building on theories on the post-political condition (e.g. Mouffe, 2005; Swyngedouw, 2009; Žižek, 2000), this article analyses (de-)politicization in environmental ‘alternative action organizations’ (AAO) (Giugni & Grasso, 2018; Kousis, Giugni, & Lahusen, 2018). AAOs have been defined as ‘collective bodies engaged in carrying out alternatives to dominant socioeconomic and cultural practices’ (Zamponi & Bosi, 2018). Environmental AAOs (hereafter EAAOs) focus on the promotion of ‘sustainable materialism’ (Schlosberg & Coles, 2016) through ‘the development of alternative systems and counter-flows of both power and goods’ with the aim to construct ‘different practices, institutions, [and] systems for meeting some of our basic material needs – food, energy, and clothing – in more just and sustainable ways’ (Schlosberg, 2019, p. 1).

CONTACT Joost de Moor  joost.demoor@statsvet.su.se  Department of Political Science, Stockholm University, Universitetsvägen 10F, 114 18, Stockholm, Sweden

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The growth and spread of EAOs has become of keen interest to scholars of environmentalism in recent years. Their alternatives have been welcomed by some as deeply political means to enhance ecological democracy (Eckersley, 2019; Schlosberg, 2019; Schlosberg & Craven, 2019). Yet others have critiqued this turn as a form of depoliticisation, highlighting how alternatives have a tendency to be marginal and non-confrontational in nature (e.g. Alkon & Guthman, 2017; Maniates, 2001; Thörn & Svenberg, 2016), or even that they are merely simulating politics, sustaining rather than challenging society's unsustainability (Blühdorn, 2014, 2017).

As our ethnographic analysis of two EAOs in Manchester (UK) demonstrates, this academic debate is also reflected in activists' discussions around strategic dilemmas. Understanding how such dilemmas unfold in the context of today's environmental politics is vital. Of course, EAOs and sustainable materialism have been around since the dawn of environmental movements, and so have discussions about reformist and radical strategies (Doherty, 2002). Yet given the intensification of threats to global ecosystems, even as environmental issues and environmental movements have become mainstream, the question of how environmentalists deal with the challenge of deciding on an appropriate strategy has become even more compelling.

Our article emphasizes the tension between environmentalists' radical ambitions on the one hand, and pragmatic organizational considerations on the other. We suggest that competing arguments about (de-)politicization can be reconciled if we assess the political as having three different dimensions: critical political ideas, agonistic theories of social change, and contentious action to challenge power. Differentiating the political in this way allows us to show how EAOs can be seen as strategic actors, pursuing political and social change in a post-political context that requires them to balance radicalism against the diffusion of their projects. Consequently, their experience is that opposing 'environmental bads' can be hard to reconcile with a focus on promoting 'environmental goods,' even though both are seen as instrumental to bringing about social change. Thus, we complicate sustainable materialism's depiction of EAOs as political by showing that being motivated by radical ideas is just one dimension of the political and may not always find expression in strategic practice. Yet we also qualify the post-political and post-ecologist critique by showing that activists are working with a reflexive awareness of the limits of their own agency, suggesting that they are not simply depoliticized simulations of politics, but pursuing a strategy based on their own reading of systemic constraints.

Sustainable materialism, post-politics and three dimensions of the political

Literature on sustainable materialism (Eckersley, 2019; Schlosberg, 2019; Schlosberg & Coles, 2016; Schlosberg & Craven, 2019) has in recent years depicted the growth and spread of alternatives by EAOs (also referred to using many other terms, including sustainable consumption movement organizations (Forno & Graziano, 2014) and life-style movement organizations (de Moor, 2017; Haenfler, Johnson, & Jones, 2012)). They aim to achieve direct impacts through concrete alternatives and use them as examples to prefigure broader social changes (Yates, 2015). A turn to local alternative projects is not new and arguably a cyclical feature for social movements in liberal democracies after periods of mass mobilization, as in the 1970s after 1968, and more recently after the global justice movement (Forno & Graziano, 2014; Leach and Haunss, 2009). However,

these environmental projects can also be seen as providing a timely new strategic direction for an environmental movement that worries about the ability of states to solve environmental crises (Beck, 1997) but itself has failed to build support beyond the typical and most likely participants (Giugni & Grasso, 2015). Sustainable materialism offers a do-it-yourself approach that does not rely solely on the state (Stolle & Micheletti, 2013). Placing questions of production and consumption at the centre and engaging with everyday life, material practices provide a new means for environmentalism to connect to wider communities (Eckersley, 2019; Meyer, 2015). By organizing collectively and framing their projects in terms of political economy, these EAAOs are collectively pursuing political change in contrast to the emphasis on individual responsibility in the discourses of ethical consumption (Schlosberg, 2019).

Yet questions have been raised about how political EAAOs are. Previous studies argue that alternative action organizations are often not political at the outset but become so as they develop, often making contentious claims for public solutions at the collective level (Giugni & Grasso, 2018; Zamponi & Bosi, 2018). These studies focus on AAOs seeking to cope with economic crisis and austerity, but similar observations have been made regarding EAAOs (e.g. de Moor, Marien, & Hooghe, 2017; Dubuisson-Quellier, Lamine, & Le Velly, 2011).

In this article, we focus on definitions of the political as developed in critical studies of the post-political condition, on the basis of which EAAOs are more often depicted as depoliticized (e.g. Chatterton & Cutler, 2008; Kenis, 2016). This literature distinguishes between politics on the one hand – as the sphere of political processes and institutions through which an order is established – and the political on the other, as a moment in which the status quo is fundamentally challenged (Mouffe, 2005). Based on this distinction, not every public claim can be considered political. Rather, activism becomes political when ‘a particular demand is not simply part of a negation of interests but aims at something more, and starts to function as the metaphoric condensation of the global restructuring of the entire social space’ (Žižek, 2000, p. 208). The post-political condition we have arguably been in since the end of the Cold War, renders such transformative political activism unlikely as radical critiques of liberal capitalism have been marginalized or repressed (Schlembach, Lear, & Bowman, 2012). Social movement scholars may refer to such a shift as a closing of the ‘discursive opportunity structure’ for radical activism (Koopmans & Statham, 1999).

It has been argued that de-politicization understood in this way has affected the environmental movement in particular. As they have institutionalized over the past fifty years, parts of the environmental movement in the Global North have replaced the radical ecological critique of the system that animated movements in the 1970s and 1980s with discourses such as ecological modernization and sustainable development that are more easily accommodated within political institutions (Kenis & Lievens, 2014; Swyngedouw, 2009). In recent discussions, this critique has been directed in particular at the sort of EAAOs championed as cases of sustainable materialism. By focusing on the promotion of alternatives, ‘positive solutions’ and individual responsibility, and in some cases the rejection of political confrontation, EAAOs have been accused of accepting a place in the margins of capitalism, rather than challenging it (Alkon & Guthman, 2017; Chatterton & Cutler, 2008; Kenis, 2016; Maniates, 2001; Neal, 2013). Some see EAAOs as the outcome of the state’s efforts to turn contentious subjects into complicit service

providers (Mayer, 2013; Thörn & Svenberg, 2016). Blühdorn's post-ecologist critique depicts different origins of the de-politicization of environmentalism (primarily individualization in contemporary consumer societies (2014; see also Kenis & Lievens, 2014)), but arrives at a similar critique of the shift to alternatives (2017, and this volume): 'Remaining purely experimental and experiential, they are neither really designed to unhinge the logic which they appear to be challenging, nor are they ever likely to achieve this.' (Blühdorn, 2017, p. 57).

These critiques have naturally been challenged by those who argue that sustainable materialism represents a positive development for environmentalism. They point out that many activists involved in EAAOs are motivated by clearly 'political' or 'ecological' ideas, including a systematic critique of, and desire to transform, the capitalist economy (Schlosberg, 2019; Urry, 2011). Activists are aware of the challenges pointed out in post-political and post-ecologist critiques, and actively try to address them by promoting alternatives that challenge the status quo. Schlosberg and Craven (2019, p. 117) conclude that Swyngedouw and Blühdorn universalize their critique without acknowledging the 'plurality and diversity of environmentalisms' (see also Lerner, 2014).

We agree that universalizing this critique would undeservedly overlook some clearly 'political' elements of the environmental movement (cf. Kenis, 2016; Kenis & Lievens, 2014). Yet Schlosberg and Craven's defence of the political in EAAOs for sustainable materialism in turn overlooks that 'the political' can be operationalized in various ways and that looking beyond ideas and motivations alone may lead to other conclusions. In analyses of environmentalism, we find that 'the political' has been operationalized in at least two other common ways: based on a theory of social change that embraces agonism, and based on contentious political action (de Moor, *Forthcoming*). By also considering these other dimensions, it becomes clear why in practice, sustainable materialism sometimes does represent a degree of de-politicisation despite the 'political' motivations and ideas of its organizers. Thus, while we do not seek to settle debates on the nature of the political, we consider it important that these dimensions are clarified to advance discussion on the political nature of EAAOs.

In the first dimension of the political, what matters is thus whether movements advance an idea that challenges the existing order. For instance, some depict clearly political ideas like climate justice as drivers of environmental activism (Chatterton, Featherstone, & Routledge, 2013; Kenis & Lievens, 2014), and of EAAOs in particular (Schlosberg, 2019). Likewise, ideas like de-growth and commoning, which clearly challenge capitalist principles, are also found to be important drivers of some EAAOs (Chatterton et al., 2013; D'Alisa, Demaria, & Cattaneo, 2013). Yet sometimes EAAOs also present their solutions in a post-political fashion; as positive solutions that everyone, regardless of their political position, should be able to agree upon, or as an issue that can be tackled without fundamentally questioning current systems (Alkon & Guthman, 2017; D'Alisa et al., 2013).

The second dimension – theories of social change – can be assessed in relation to whether activists embrace or reject agonism (Kenis, 2019). In other words, do they perceive that differences between groups over fundamental values are ever-present and that politics requires challenging opponents to reveal hegemonic forms of power (Mouffe, 2013, p. 14), or do they attempt to present environmental issues as 'above politics', solvable through deliberative consensus, and therefore post-political

(Swyngedouw, 2009)? Kenis (2016) identifies the prominent case of Transition Towns as possibly the main example of an EAAO which is post-political in this way, even though it may advocate some political ideas (see also Chatterton & Cutler, 2008). In contrast to climate justice activists who engage in open conflict to challenge the systemic injustices and inequalities involved in climate change, Transition Towns develops a positive environmentalism that eschews political conflict in favour of advocating practical local solutions which can command broader appeal (Hopkins, 2008). For Transition Towns, this non-conflictual approach is most likely to lead to transformative social change whereas an agonistic view of the political frustrates this goal.

The third dimension of the political takes the recognition of the importance of agonism one step further, and considers groups' actual engagements in conflict through contentious action. Groups that engage exclusively in promoting alternatives may pursue interstitial strategies that aim at gradually replacing the status quo (Olin Wright, 2010), but do not engage in direct political conflict, and would therefore only adhere to agonism as a principle. Critical political ideas and agonistic understandings of social change can be and have been expressed through conventional (e.g. party) politics. Yet the importance of contentious action is underlined by the observation that under the post-political condition, opportunities to express political ideas and agonism have mostly closed for environmentalism within institutional or conventional political arenas (Schlembach et al., 2012). Therefore, in the post-political context, extra-institutional, contentious or transgressive action may become the primary means to advance the first two dimensions of the political (Dikeç & Swyngedouw, 2017), even if contentious action is not always used to advance political ideas.

All three dimensions of the 'political' are evident in discussions of environmental activism, and we do not wish to argue that any or all of them are necessary or sufficient conditions to consider groups 'political'. Indeed, we do not wish to dispute Schlosberg and Craven's conclusion that many sustainable materialists are 'political' based on their motivations. Yet we wish to take seriously concerns heard often among environmentalists that promoting environmental goods is only one part of advancing change towards a more sustainable society, which also requires opposition to environmental bads. For this reason, it is imperative to consider the second and third dimension of the political as well. In particular, building on Schlosberg and Craven's analysis, we assess why 'genuinely political' motivations are not always expressed throughout the second and third dimension of the political, and why for defenders of post-political or post-ecologist critiques, sustainable materialism may often appear as essentially depoliticized.

The contradictory demands of diffusion and the political

The extent to which multiple strategies can be advanced within social movement organizations is closely related to resource constraints – both at the level of individual activists and at the level of organizations (McCarthy & Zald, 1977, 2002). Our analysis will consider such factors. Yet limits to the expression of political motivations and agonism through contentious action in EAAOs may be more fundamental and could persist regardless of the availability of resources. Specifically, there is an overlooked contradiction in the expectation that effective environmentalism advances the promotion of environmental goods (i.e. alternatives) as well as opposition to environmental bads.

Schlosberg and Craven, point out ‘the difficulty of maintaining agonism when the idea is to spread, diffuse, and replicate one’s practice’ (2019, p. 125). We build on this observation by making it a central focus of our analysis.

More specifically, we examine the common expectation that in order to become impactful, alternatives must emerge from their niches to become *diffused* throughout society as far and wide as possible to maximize their impact through processes of upscaling, replication, and translation:

First, *scaling-up* sees individual projects recruit more participants and grow in size, activity, or impact. Second, project *replication* in new locations or contexts multiplies the number of participants and scale of innovative activity overall. Third, partial elements of niche ideas are *translated* into mainstream contexts to address regime crises, gaining influence but commonly losing much of their radical ethos (Seyfang & Longhurst, 2016, p. 4).

Diffusion has thus been directly linked to the transformational potential of EAAOs. Yet it may require that alternatives are rendered palatable for the wider society, typically by toning down groups’ radical messages or tactics (Eckersley, 2019, p. 15; Seyfang & Smith, 2007, p. 597). The activists that we observed shared the common view that the more acceptable alternatives appear to wide sections of society, the more they will spread. Thus a focus on diffusion as essential to transformation is in tension with the argument that to be political, environmental groups should challenge the status quo through agonism and contentious action. Despite this apparent tension, discussions and analyses of ‘the political’ and diffusion have remained largely distinct. Therefore, analysing how activists navigate such a tension is key to improving our understanding of their radical potential.

Case selection and methods

By focusing on two cases of EAAOs whose organizers have a background in contentious activism, we explore how this tension plays out at the level of strategic decisions. We examine two organizations in Manchester in the North-West of England. One, the Kindling Trust, focuses on the promotion of a local, sustainable and just food economy. The other, Carbon Coop, aims to promote carbon reductions through retrofitting houses to become more energy efficient and by developing smart energy technologies. Both organizations were chosen based on one of the authors’ previous research on environmental activism in Manchester (Doherty, Plows, & Wall, 2007). We knew in advance that they were led by individuals whose background was in radical, oppositional environmental groups, including Earth First!. We thus anticipated the importance of ‘political’ ideas and motivations, and therefore, that these cases would allow us to investigate how the presence of the first dimension of the political would play out in practice, taking into account the second and third dimensions of the political as well. A background in oppositional environmental activism has been depicted in other studies of EAAOs (e.g. Forno & Graziano, 2014). The associated strategic dilemmas we investigate are therefore likely relevant to understanding these types of EAAOs more generally; while recognizing that local and political context should of course inform such an understanding.

We studied these groups primarily through theory-driven participant observation (Lichterman, 2002). Between January and May 2017, one of the authors worked as a volunteer for both organizations. This provided the opportunity to observe how they

advance social change, how strategic decisions are made, and how they deal with contradictory demands. To minimize interference with strategizing in these organizations, volunteering focused on support for ongoing activities. In the case of Carbon Coop, this primarily concerned assisting with preparing a one-day community festival about energy and retrofit. In the case of the Kindling Trust, volunteering primarily concerned collecting information to support various campaigns, including a bid to get the City of Manchester to sign up to the *Milan Urban Food Policy Pact*. The observations furthermore provided numerous opportunities for informal interviews with organizers and members.

In addition, we conducted 11 semi-structured interviews of between one to two hours with key members in both organizations, undertook two follow up interviews in 2018 aimed at exploring our explanations with key informants, and interviewed activists from two closely affiliated campaign organizations in the city about their perception of the organizations. Interviews were transcribed and analysed using open and closed coding (Lichterman, 2002). Finally, the long-standing research experience of one of the authors in Manchester informed our perception of changes in repertoires over time. This combination of qualitative methods allowed us to observe and interrogate how dilemmas in everyday strategizing were dealt with.

Promoting sustainability in Manchester

Both Carbon Coop and Kindling focus mainly on the promotion of sustainable alternatives. Given these organizations' background in radical environmentalist opposition, it is unsurprising that underneath a seemingly apolitical cover (e.g. websites focused on positive solutions), we find more 'political' motivations (cf. Schlosberg, 2019). However, as we will detail below, this commitment seldom takes centre stage – less often than some organizers would want. In the remainder of this section, we therefore analyse why this may be the case. We start by outlining the organizations' main activities, which focus on promoting alternatives and their diffusion. We then examine the role of the political in both organizations and we analyse how an organizational context focused on diffusion affects the role of the political.

Carbon Coop, founded in 2008, is a cooperative with 120 members and six part-time employees. It focuses on two energy-related grassroots innovations: retrofitting housing to achieve reductions in energy consumption and smart energy monitoring. Its core business is to help its members retrofit their houses to radically reduce their energy use and carbon footprint. In addition to this, Carbon Coop is involved in a European Union-funded project (the main source of its income during the period of research) to develop smart energy monitoring, which should allow householders to reduce their carbon footprint.

However, there is a strong realization among its employees (who are also the key organizers) that the organisation in its current size is not likely to produce a significant step towards achieving its ambitious main goal, which is that: 'domestic carbon emissions are radically reduced in order to avoid runaway climate change.' Retrofit is therefore also seen as having a key exemplary function, showing how significant carbon reductions can be made to housing through grassroots initiatives. Carbon Coop uses several diffusion strategies to advance this exemplar function. It makes efforts to scale-up the organisation

and to increase the number of people retrofitting their houses. In part this is a matter of attracting new members and building the expertise and socio-economic networks that can facilitate retrofits, yet some of its services, such as household energy assessments and DIY retrofit courses, are provided for non-members as well. To involve new participants, as well as to spread the wider vision about a low-carbon society, Carbon Coop organized a community festival in April 2017, which it advertised as ‘an opportunity for people to come together to celebrate low carbon, diverse and just communities.’ The organizers not only made efforts to attract as many people as possible to learn about carbon reduction, but also to reach beyond people who were already involved in environmentalism, such as other local community organizations, notably black and minority ethnic organizations.

While scaling-up is perceived as important, some organizers perceive that there is a hypothetical ceiling for this. Rather than promoting tokenistic changes (changing light bulbs), Carbon Coop takes a radical ‘whole-house approach’ to retrofitting that can have dramatic impacts on a house and the behaviour of its inhabitants. Since this can only be successful given sufficient technical quality as well as household commitment, there is a concern that if the organisation were to grow too fast or too large, this quality could be compromised. Compromised quality could, in turn, hamper the exemplary function that Carbon Coop aims to have. Moreover, Carbon Coop strongly believes in the cooperative, democratic, egalitarian and flexible way it currently operates as part of its prefigurative strategy, fearing that increased organizational size might also threaten this.

For this reason, Carbon Coop focuses on two additional forms of diffusion. First, it aims to replicate part of what it does by offering its models, such as household energy assessment tools, for anyone to use, and offers training to support organizations in other cities to adopt these tools. Similarly, the smart energy innovations are all produced in open-source ways to ensure minimal barriers to the replication of these efforts elsewhere.

Second, Carbon Coop diffuses knowledge by advising local government on energy-related issues. They contribute expertise and have an opportunity to network with public and private actors. According to one organizer we interviewed, local government can no longer afford in-house experts – a consequence of the impact of austerity – but at least this opens the opportunity for groups like Carbon Coop to have input. Similarly, Carbon Coop engages with large private-sector energy distributors to work on implementing retrofit and smart energy at a larger scale, resolving their mutual weaknesses: while the energy distributor lacks some expertise, Carbon Coop lacks the resources to scale-up.

Compared to Carbon Coop, the Kindling Trust has a more holistic vision of societal change. Where the former focuses more on technical solutions that can lead to a ‘low carbon culture’, the latter views climate change and other forms of environmental degradation as symptoms of a broken, profit-driven capitalist system. Although the staff of Carbon Coop often express this view too, it is much less embedded in their public statements and strategies.

Kindling is a not-for-profit social enterprise with eight part-time employees that was founded in 2007. It sees food as a broad-ranging issue that has the potential to reach most of the public but more fundamentally it aims for deep societal change, based on revising the entire food system. Kindling seeks to localize food production through: a campaign to get more local people into professional food growing; establishing local distribution systems for public organizations, businesses and private costumers; generating a market by promoting the purchase of local, organic

produce; and finding land for food production, if possible within the boundaries of the (mainly urban) Greater Manchester area. In addition, it organizes events to promote sustainability more generally through, for example, the screening of political films.

Scaling-up happens by setting up new projects funded through grant applications, as well as by involving increasing numbers of people in existing ones. Projects that sell locally produced vegetables are used to increase market demand, which then opens up opportunities for more growers. One obstacle to this has been the under-recruitment of new growers since, despite Kindling's efforts, it remains a hard and low paid job. Partly to solve this issue, Kindling aims to have its own farm. New growers could live on the farm, which would, in turn, relieve some of their financial burdens, thus making local food growing a more viable option. The farm would also include food-based social enterprises and a centre for social change to be used by social movement groups for meetings and organizing events.

Diffusion through replication happens mainly in national networks, which contact Kindling about their model for change. Diffusion by translation happens primarily by trying to engage local authorities to consider the promotion of Kindling's practices. During the period we observed, Kindling prepared a 'Kindling city plan', which, in the context of the upcoming local elections in Manchester, was intended to attract support and pledges from political candidates to support a Kindling vision of a sustainable local economy.

Political motivations and agonism

Although both Kindling and Carbon Coop occasionally demonstrate 'post-political' tendencies by downplaying the political nature of the socio-technical innovations they promote, both groups are at least partially 'political' in the first two of the three dimensions outlined above. As mentioned above, both are inspired by a political philosophy that clearly challenges the guiding principles of the current capitalist status quo and both recognize that social change involves opposition between groups with conflicting interests. As mentioned, Kindling defines its projects as for 'food sovereignty' and in opposition to capitalism and can therefore certainly be defined as 'political' regarding the first dimension. It defines its approach as 'radical [because] we focus on solutions that address problems at their root cause [and] equitable and just [because] we recognize and challenge social economic and ecological inequality both locally and globally' (from Kindling's 'strategy of social change').

Concurrently, the second dimension of the political also occasionally surfaces. On two separate occasions we observed one of the founders defend to colleagues the importance of Kindling 'not just saying yes, but also saying no', reminding herself and the other core organizers that despite their focus on promoting alternatives, it remains important to oppose systemic flaws. That this balance appears to be appreciated more widely within the organisation became apparent during its strategy day when almost all participants mentioned that they appreciated Kindling for being 'both practical and strategic', meaning that they do not just promote alternatives, but also consider more strategically how deep system change can be achieved, by reflecting upon strategies to challenge the status quo. According to one organizer:

The activism is perhaps the [...] saying no to the current system, and then there's the promoting the change that could [...] make a [...] more positive systems change. [...] And it feels like all of those things need to happen at the same time.

Another Kindling staff member describes a symbiotic relationship between the two:

I think the power is in both [resistance and alternatives], and both working together. [...] I had a vision for Kindling. [...] It would be: we're creating jobs, we're generating income, we had a surplus. That was going to support young activists or lobbying or movement building. [...] Successful social movements aren't just about protests. They're about [...] infrastructure and supporting people.

Within Carbon Coop, the first two dimensions of the political are present as well, but less overtly. Indeed, its main strategy is focused heavily on technological innovations for sustainability, consistent with its core aim of enabling its members to reduce their domestic carbon footprint. This technical focus is implicitly non-political. Still, Carbon Coop's official aims also reach beyond the strictly technological, as they state that 'Equity and environmental justice informs everything we do'. The professional staff and many of the members share a background in radical politics, direct action and civil disobedience and a critical perspective on the capitalist system's impact on the environment; they also have in common a desire for systemic change to address this. During panel discussions at a community festival organized by Carbon Coop, attendees commented on several occasions that taking individual responsibility is not enough and that the capitalist status quo needs to be challenged to achieve real social change, something that during an interview one of the founders of Carbon Coop thought was unsurprising coming from their member base.

Carbon Coop grew from a friendship network with strong roots in direct action, and these roots explain aspects of its practices and discourse. For example, the community festival mentioned above had a program that included speakers from environmental direct action networks and Carbon Coop activists see themselves as replacing individualized consumerist environmentalism with an organized, cooperative environmentalism. The argument is that collectivization not only increases agency, it also leads to more effective political action. Indeed, during a board meeting, it was said that the membership wanted the organization to spend more of its resources on advancing change at a systemic level by engaging with policy work.

Obstacles to politicization

Despite clear political motivations, biographies, and recognition of the importance of opposition, contentious political *action* is not central to either organization's day-to-day work. In the 'translation' work both organizations do, they proudly claim they have the liberty to be critical whenever they work with power-holders, yet the organizations seldom engage in campaigns that contentiously (let alone, disobediently) oppose the practices or principles driving the unsustainability of society.

To an important extent, this is explained by the fact that the organizers perceive their groups as being too weak to take on opponents such as corporations, and therefore promoting alternatives is a more efficient way of using resources. Moreover, it is often pointed out by them that they are not campaigning organizations. Indeed, one can argue

that given their core goal of promoting alternatives, it is unfair to inquire about the contentious aspect of the political in these groups. Nonetheless, both organizations proudly describe themselves as having an important ‘activist’ character and both organizations recognize the importance of oppositional work. However, interviewees from both organizations indicated that they felt that when they moved from transgressive environmental action to focus on grassroots initiatives, they left a lacuna, because nobody took over the contentious campaigning, and they regret that they as individuals and their organization do not engage in more oppositional work. Our findings here differ from those by Schlosberg and Craven (2019, p. 121), who primarily depict activists’ fatigue with opposition. We find that the desire to oppose as well as promote can still be quite strong in EAAOs. It is therefore not only theoretically useful to look beyond ideas and ask what hampers especially the third – but therefore also the other dimensions – of the political. It also makes sense empirically.

There appear to be three main individual, organizational, and contextual reasons for this partial de-politicisation. The first reason is biographical, thus underlining the relevance of work on activist life courses and biographical outcomes (e.g. Fillieule & Neveu, 2019). Key organizers have aged and have found it difficult to sustain their previous level of direct action. They also indicated that this form of action always put them at a strategic disadvantage because they had to oppose much stronger actors. Moreover, after focusing on an oppositional strategy for years, they felt an urge instead to start working on what they would like to see happen. They also indicated that full-time engagement with direct action is a lifestyle that one can only do for a limited amount of time. It often involves living on a very low income (part of which is strategic, because if an activist owns nothing, the government also cannot take anything away as punishment) and facing risky and stressful situations. Moving to the promotion of alternatives offers a way for activists to have more security while still engaging with the same issues. Moreover, it was pointed out that it is harder to know the efficacy of opposition compared to more positive action, which further motivates them to focus on the latter. An employee of Kindling summarizes it as follows:

Most of us [...] have been involved in [...] campaigning against things. [...] [The founders of the organisation] wanted to create an alternative, that they were sort of saying yes to something rather than [...] constantly campaigning against the negative. I think in a selfish way, it’s just what I enjoy doing more. Like seeing something very tangible [...]. I think activism is really hard because you don’t win very often [...]. I believe that direct action and other kinds of campaigning do have an impact, [...] but it’s very intangible. [...] you have to sort of keep telling yourself ‘well it would probably be worse if [...] no one was kicking up a fuss’, but I think that’s quite hard to keep doing, you know, for a long time. [...] And it’s just much easier to feel kind of rewarded and motivated, I think, when there’s something concrete.

An employee of Carbon Coop describes a similar feeling:

I think it’s easier to prove to yourself that you’re doing something effective when you’re doing this kind of work [promoting alternatives]. I think I would worry if I was [still] a campaigner and it’s very hard to demonstrate impacts doing that kind of work.

Overall, many indicated that they would still like to engage more in protest as individuals, but the work they do now is so demanding (often because it is underfunded, which needs

to be compensated for by personal commitment) that little time or energy remains. One Carbon Coop employee told us ‘I’d like to do more campaigning, [but doing so] would also feel like I’m piling on more work.’

The relevance of resource constraints (McCarthy & Zald, 2002), secondly, is reflected at the organizational level, where opposition is also seen as important by many, but rarely prioritized in the attribution of resources. It is a secondary priority relative to the alternatives-oriented official goals of the organizations, and consequently, is typically deferred. This is in part a result of the funding landscape. In both organizations, it was commented that it is much harder to fund oppositional work than practical projects. They therefore follow a strategy where they ensure an income and funding through alternatives, hoping to be able to use any surpluses created for resistance. In practice, this has remained an aspiration rather than a reality. Both Kindling and Carbon Coop argue that a focus on diffusion (especially scaling-up) is a good way to strengthen their finances to support their development as more independent and resilient collectives, which could form a platform for contentious activities. In part this can be seen as a reflection of the effects of austerity in the UK (cf. Hayes, 2017), and is in line with previous research depicting a shift to alternatives as a de-politicizing outcome of austerity (Mayer, 2013). Interviewees indicate that austerity, particularly cuts in welfare benefits, has made the full-time activist lifestyle impossible. The rising cost of living, combined with a more punitive welfare regime, has had the effect of reducing the scope for a life dedicated to activism.

Finally, we turn to the challenging fact that diffusion and contentious work can contradict one another, as a result of which the latter might be avoided no matter how well resourced the organizations were. A Kindling employee indicated that strong political campaigning would scare off potential participants or partners:

We want to be [...] accepted by the mainstream [...] who aren’t necessarily going to take people that chain themselves to things and are constantly shouting about issues very seriously, whereas, when we are showing that we’ve achieved change and sustained it and it’s practical.

This mechanism works in the other direction as well. Insofar as being inclusive broadens the range of views within a group, this may make it harder to agree internally on common ground for opposition. As an employee of Carbon Coop explains: ‘I think the challenging thing is, as a group grows [...] then you naturally take on-board less radical views or more radical views, but you’re taking on more views.’

Both interviewees clarified that if an issue was really central to the organization’s mission, they might engage in public and open opposition. Indeed, shortly after our fieldwork was concluded, Kindling participated in a ‘farmers against fracking’ demonstration as part of a wider anti-fracking campaign. Likewise, Carbon Coop withdrew publicly as a partner for a festival on electricity organized by the Manchester Museum of Science and Industry in protest against the Museum’s acceptance of sponsorship from the oil company Shell. However, interviewees indicated that they fear that strong political engagement by the organization itself could compromise funding, and in the case of direct action, there would even be a financial liability because fines or compensation claims could be levied on the organizations.

Finally, it is recognized that a strong, overt, political agenda could compromise access to local government, which could restrict opportunities for translation and influence. As

a board member of Carbon Coop explains: ‘If we’re trying to influence the uptake of solutions, then being seen as the opposition [...] isn’t particularly productive.’

Thus, although organizers stress that they will be critical if they feel they need to be, by avoiding transgressive action forms, they are restricted to the ‘positive’ promotion of their solutions, and to institutional forms of participation, such as sitting on advisory boards or responding to official calls for policy input. Although they may be critical in such contexts, there is a limit as to how confrontational they can be without compromising access. Manchester’s Labour Party-led local political institutions have for a long time adopted an economic growth-orientated agenda for the city, which converged with the Conservative national government’s vision for the city at the heart of what it termed the ‘Northern Powerhouse’. Any challenge to this growth model is consequently difficult through conventional institutional channels. Avoiding transgressive protest as the third dimension of the political, therefore, has important consequences for the expression of critical ideas and agonism: they may still inspire the alternatives-oriented activism, but our findings suggest that beyond that, their expression is fairly restricted.

Hence, alongside biographical reasons and resources constraints, the strategic priority given to diffusion seems to compromise ‘the political’ in these EAAOs in several key ways: firstly, promoting strong oppositional tactics and ideas may compromise reaching a broad audience of potential participants; secondly, attracting a broader constituency effectively dilutes political agreement within the organization; thirdly, authorities’ repression of opposition could have negative consequences for the EAAOs; and finally, opposition could compromise institutional access.

Conclusion

Our analysis demonstrates the usefulness of clearly separating various ways to operationalize the post-political critique of environmentalism, and to expand empirical analyses beyond activists’ self-declared motivations to assess how these motivations are turned into actions through everyday strategizing. Doing so has brought us closer to reconciling the conflicting interpretations of environmental AAOs as presented by the literature on sustainable materialism and the post-political critique. Like Schlosberg and Craven (Schlosberg, 2019; Schlosberg & Craven, 2019), we find that AAOs for sustainable materialism can be driven by clear political motivations, such as a desire to radically transform capitalist modes of production and consumption. Additionally, we find that although these groups focus on the promotion of alternatives or environmental goods, they underline the importance of agonistic opposition to environmental bads as well. However, they demonstrate also that even when the first two dimensions – that is, being motivated by ‘political’ ideas and embracing an agonistic view of politics – are in place, the third more active, overtly contentious dimension of the political often remains hard to actualize. Our inquiry shows that, besides biographical factors and resource constraints, EAAOs avoid contentious action forms and even outspoken political messaging because it can compromise diffusion, by possibly putting off potential participants or political allies.

Insofar as the post-political is understood as a critique that exposes discourses that hide or suppress political conflicts (Kenis, 2019), there is then evidence that it is relevant to the everyday strategizing of alternatives-oriented groups, and so is an understanding of de-

politicization as the disappearance of contentious action (Mayer, 2013). However, we do not see this as providing sufficient grounds in itself for a validation of the most critical post-ecologist readings of the state of Western environmentalism, which attributes little agency to activists, or depicts environmentalism as simulation (Blühndorn, 2017). Like Shlosberg and Craven, we find that activists consciously navigate the structural constraints posed by the post-political context in a strategic attempt to maximize their impact.

This also means that an opening up of the discursive opportunity structure for radical environmental critique will likely be picked up by these groups, particularly as we may be seeing a re-politicization of the liberal capitalist status quo (Mouffe 2018). The recent growth and popularity of climate activism, in particular with large mobilizations by Extinction Rebellion and the Fridays for Future climate school strikes, may further open up the discursive opportunity structure to politicize environmentalism. An avenue for future research is to interrogate how these changes may or may not affect the (re-) politicization of EAOs – especially regarding the expression of radical ideas through agonistic challenges and contentious action.

For now, we conclude that it is problematic to combine diffusion with agonism and contentious action within a single organization. Yet the strategic decisions of actors within single organizations need to be understood in relation to the wider social movement scene in which they are embedded (de Moor, forthcoming *Forthcoming*). When considering the wider movement scene, the question that emerges is why the strategic decisions and actions of one or two organizations, and in particular their focus on promoting environmental goods as opposed to opposing environmental bads, could apparently not be compensated for by other organizations or groups. Of course, it has been argued that the wider environmental movement may face an overwhelming depoliticising condition (Blühndorn, 2017; Swyngedouw, 2009). Yet a fuller consideration of the extent to which the post-political critique applies to broader environmental movement scenes is required in future research.

In sum, focusing on the question of strategy brings to the fore the complex interplay between motivation and political context which we need to recognize if we are to do justice to the way that activists involved in these kinds of projects negotiate difficult political decisions. We found that even in relatively small EAOs there is an attention to the meaning and significance of their action in relation to longer-term aims, and an awareness of the implications of their own actions for the wider environmental movement. These organizations share much of the realism and critique of post-political analysis, but they also seek to make a positive contribution to changing political culture, both through the embodied citizenship of sustainable materialism and through their partly contradictory attempts to translate their ideas and practices into the mainstream and have these scaled-up and diffused. In doing so, they constantly navigate the difficult challenge of when to expand their reach and when to increase the volume on their political messaging. This is arguably better understood as an inherent condition for movement groups working, at least partly, within the constraints of post-politics rather than as a sign of de-politicisation of these groups per se.

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Notes on contributors

Joost de Moor is a Postdoc at Stockholm University where he leads a project on environmental social movements. His research interests further include urban movements, political participation and political consumerism. He has published on these topics in journals including *Acta Politica*, *Parliamentary Affairs*, *Environmental Politics*, *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, and *Mobilization*.

Philip Catney is a Senior Lecturer in Politics at Keele University. His research interests are in the areas of environmental and urban governance. He has had articles published in journals such as the *Journal of Environmental Policy and Planning*, *Environment and Planning C*, *Public Administration*, *Critical Social Policy*, *Environmental Hazards*, *Journal of Environmental Management*, among others. He is also series editor of the *Transforming Environmental Politics and Policy* series, with Professor Timothy Doyle (Routledge).

Brian Doherty is a Professor of Political Sociology at Keele University and the main focus of his research is on the relationship between ideas and actions in environmental movements. His most recent book is *Environmentalism, Resistance and Solidarity* (with Timothy Doyle, Palgrave 2013) and he is currently working on a study of criminal prosecutions of social movement actors.

ORCID

Joost de Moor  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0413-9590>

Philip Catney  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4626-9657>

Brian Doherty  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1259-1058>

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